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Mobilizing Contingent Labor & Education For Democracy

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No 8 (2002)

Mobilizing Contingent Labor & Education For Democracy

Special Issue Edited by Chris Carter

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Martin, B. (2002). Review of *Disciplined Minds*. *Workplace*, 8, 147-150.

JEFF SCHMIDT'S *DISCIPLINED MINDS*

Brian Martin

As an academic laborer, I design subjects, set assignments, mark essays and supervise theses. This seems natural enough. Could it actually be a deeply ideological process? Worse yet, am I unknowingly helping produce graduates who are more conformist than I wish or imagine?

Jeff Schmidt argues that training professionals is a process of fostering political and intellectual subordination. On the surface, this is a startling claim, since the often-stated aim of educators is to promote independent thinking. Critics have long argued that schooling is a method of preparing children for life as workers within the class structure (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), but have not often pursued the same analysis at the level of higher education.

There are two key ideological processes in professional education, according to Schmidt. One is favoring students who pick up the point of view of their superiors, behavior Schmidt calls "ideological discipline." The other is favoring students who direct their curiosity as requested by others, a trait Schmidt delightfully dubs "assignable curiosity." For example, the teacher sets the class an assignment, say on symbolism in a novel. It doesn't matter so much whether the novel is by Austen or Gordimer. The question is whether the students will do as they are told. "Good" students will undertake the assigned task conscientiously, perhaps even going beyond what the teacher expected—but in a way that pleases the teacher. "Difficult" students may do something different, refusing to accept the task as given. No prizes for guessing which students get encouragement and rewards.

The same dynamic applies when it comes to qualifying examinations, well known to anyone undertaking a PhD. To be sure of passing, students knuckle down to learn what is expected, for example by studying past exam papers and reading all the assigned books. Any students who instead follow their own interests by only studying things that intrigue them personally are risking their professional future. A few of such independently minded students get through the exams, but most of those who pass have played it safe. They have learned to acquiesce intellectually. They are ready for life as a professional who will not step outside the bounds set by those with power. Schmidt says that "professional education and employment push people to accept a role in which they do not make a significant difference, a politically subordinate role." (p. 2).

In developing his critique, Schmidt adopts a practical, reader-friendly approach. For example, he analyzes the PhD qualifying exam as a social framework endorsing the status quo with detailed illustrations from his own field, physics, describing the need to memorize tricks that are useful only on exam problems, to restrict attention to "problem fragments" and give priority to theory, all of which prepare a student to accept alienating work in a hierarchical system. He also gives examples from other fields and includes fascinating letters he's received from graduate students and professionals who have developed some understanding of the ideological features of professional education. He tells about professionals with fake credentials who are quite able to survive so long as they have the right attitudes, illustrating the primacy of ideological discipline in professionals' work. He reveals how scientists describe their own work in ways

that conceal its practical relevance, thus preserving for themselves the illusion that they, rather than the funding agency, are setting the agenda.

Nearly half of *Disciplined Minds* is devoted to the selection of professionals. This material on the political dimensions to graduate school admission, construction of exams and "cooling out" of unsuccessful aspirants will be of special interest to readers of *Workplace*. But Schmidt's critique is much broader than this, encompassing the work and role of all professionals, from police to doctors as well as academics, as indicated by the subtitle to the book, *A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes Their Lives*. His central claim is that professionals are more timid, intellectually and politically, than nonprofessionals. Professionals may have progressive attitudes about "distant" issues such as poverty or foreign policy but, Schmidt argues, when it comes to issues in and close to their own work, most of them behave "professionally," which means cautiously and conservatively. Most scientists are quite happy to undertake projects for whoever is willing to pay for the research, whether universities, corporations or government. Most Soviet scientists just got on with the job without questioning government repression, and likewise most scientists in Nazi Germany made no protest. The concept of assignable curiosity thus has wide applicability.

Ironically, the key to the political dimensions of professionals' work is their belief that they are not and must not be political—an ideology of not being ideological. "As a professional, the teacher is 'objective' when presenting the school curriculum: She doesn't 'take sides,' or 'get political.' However, the ideology of the status quo is built into the curriculum. The professional's objectivity, then, boils down to not challenging this built-in ideology." (p. 32).

Schmidt shows great understanding of and empathy with the psychological anguish of many professionals, especially their discomfort during years of graduate school as they jettison their ideals in order to enter their career of choice. "Although the professional has sidelined his original goals, he usually retains some memory of them. Any such memory inevitably points to the compromises he has made and therefore can be an unrecognized source of unease in the professional's life." (p. 121). Schmidt says that professionals seek money and status as compensations for subordinating their ideals.

Several things may have helped Schmidt to undertake a critique of this sort. He has personal experience of going through the system but was able to get his PhD without fully conforming to usual expectations. Aside from some years teaching secondary school, he has mainly worked as an editor for *Physics Today* magazine, thus giving some separation from day-to-day ideological work with students. Finally, he has remained an activist during his professional life. This shines through clearly in the final chapters in the book dealing with resistance.

Schmidt looks at what's known about cults and indoctrination, drawing lessons for graduate students and working professionals. Understanding the ways that cults work—for example by using big promises, controlling the environment, having unquestioned authority and guilt tripping—provides insight into how graduate school operates, and therefore how to resist. Schmidt does not argue that professional training is the same as indoctrination in a cult, only that "life in graduate or professional school can be very much like life in a cult—and that for students who aren't careful, it will be." (p. 218). For each feature of cults, he provides illustrations from graduate school.

Schmidt also draws on the US Army's manual that tells troops how, if they become prisoners of war, to resist indoctrination, often called brainwashing. Key elements are knowing what you're up against, preparing to take action, organizing with others, resisting subordination and dealing with collaborators by cutting off information and trying to win them over. These ideas apply quite readily to graduate students and salaried professionals, who of course are in a much stronger position to resist, though perceiving the need to resist may not be so obvious. The book concludes with a list of 33 suggestions for radical professionals working in mainstream organizations, such as encouraging coworkers to read radical

publications, organizing a union, giving activists inside information, breaking down hierarchy within your field and seeking to break down the division of labor between professionals and nonprofessionals.

Disciplined Minds is primarily an analysis of professionals in the US. While much of the book is applicable elsewhere, there is also a need for radical professionals familiar with other cultures and types of institutions to undertake parallel analyses.

Readers familiar with scholarly work in the social sciences will find a number of original features in *Disciplined Minds*. Rather than survey the literature on the sociology of professions, the sociology of education and other relevant fields, Schmidt presents his own framework and pursues his own intellectual agenda, an approach more characteristic of those trained outside the social sciences. If you are expecting assessments of such important and relevant works as Randall Collins' *The Credential Society* or Alvin Gouldner's *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, you will be disappointed, for although Schmidt knows of such works, he decided not to discuss or even cite them because they are not necessary to his argument. (He does cite plenty of sources directly relevant to his case.) On the other hand, Schmidt has pursued some puzzles—such as the role of cooling-out work and why theory has so much more status than experimental or applied work—that are seldom addressed elsewhere.

This is in keeping with Schmidt's own goal, which is far less to make a purely intellectual contribution than to foster action. Over the years I've read many books about professionals and intellectuals, but seldom is there much attention to action. *Disciplined Minds* stands out as by far the most practical treatment available, being both accessible and encouraging. For many it will be confronting to read, in that it challenges illusions about professional work, but at the same time it has a devilish undercurrent. Schmidt obviously believes it can be fun to take on the system.

For many, the challenge is to make a difference without jeopardizing one's career. Schmidt would have us give priority to making a difference. By following his own advice he ended up paying a severe penalty since, after working for 19 years as an editor at *Physics Today*, he was fired when *Disciplined Minds* was published. The book was simply too provocative for his employers (Shea, 2000/01; <http://www.disciplined-minds.com>). However, as a result of lots of organizing, the dismissal has generated far more attention for Schmidt and the book than would have otherwise been the case. There is a lesson for anyone who wants to make a difference. Choose your actions carefully, with plenty of preparation, and they will either be effective directly or, through resistance, generate greater support. Of course, if your mind had been properly disciplined, you wouldn't think of such a thing!

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